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ABSTRACT

Developmental reading instructors bear the responsibility for preparing students to handle the challenge of difficult college reading. Reading is thinking, re-thinking, and coming to a conclusion that takes into account all the various parts of the text. An excellent tool for helping students with the demands of college-level reading, the journal both forces and allows students to come to grips with what they must learn. Two complementary journal-writing assignments are the free journal and the reading journal. In the free journal, students may write on anything they read outside of class, as long as they give an insight into what the author has said and their response to it. For the reading journal, at least one reading selection is assigned per class session, with an accompanying writing assignment that must state the author's motive for writing. Students fulfill this assignment in two stages: (1) by making a short speculative statement about the author's purpose before the selection is discussed in class, and (2) by choosing two readings a week for discussion and for more "formal" journal commentaries. Although students initially respond more positively to the simpler free journal writing, responses are also positive to the more difficult assignment when students realize how they are learning to think meaningfully in working through their reading assignments. The reading journal assignment also may be used to advantage for reading assignments in classes and in general study skills classes. (NKA)

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Write to Understand:

Journaling in the Reading/Study Classroom

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Abstract

It is the belief of the author of this article that writing is a necessary component to the learning of reading. As developmental students are often deficient in both writing and in reading skills, and since the Reading class wishes to encourage vs. discourage as it hastens maximum learning, the journal seems the ideal solution to the problem which the dual deficiency and my conviction poses. While eliminating much of the anxiety associated with writing, journaling yet forces thought onto the Reading process. And the freedom of the journal promotes the freedom and flexibility of thought which is a must for the good reader. Journaling, thus, both forces thought and learning and demonstrates to student and instructor alike that thought, and therefore learning, as well, have occurred.

That Comprehension Scores on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test for students using this method show significant improvement seems to bear out the theory that writing is indeed a useful -- perhaps even a necessary -- tool for the developmental reader. In the Spring of 1987, for example, fourteen of twenty-two students improved by three or more grade levels; six improved by six or more grade levels and four improved by seven or more grade levels. One student went over the top of the Nelson-Denny score sheet.

Write to Understand:

Journaling in the Reading/Study Classroom

More, Not Less, Work Needed in Developmental Classroom

I find myself more strongly committed, after each year of teaching, to the idea that it is more and not less work, of a more and not less challenging nature, which must be given to the student who takes a Reading or a Study Skills class to ready him/herself for the rigors of college work.

A colleague once asked of an item on a reading list I was putting together for a developmental course, "What is its readability level?" and "Can this sort of student handle it?" My answer remains basically the same as it was then, having only grown in conviction and length: Since the purpose of such courses is to ready students for college work, they must be taught to handle college reading. They must be taught how to handle the difficult. No Sociology or History Professor is going to give the four-year college student special readings on the sixth- or eighth-grade level. We have to ready our students for the challenge of college work. And we must make our courses challenging, too. This is a part of the readying.

In answer to a student's challenge to the workload I had given a Reading class for their readying, I gave another rationale for challenging and heavy assignments: I want you to know, I

told them, that reading is work. We've all gone to a class and hoped that the professor would do all the work. But, if you are to learn to read well, you have to know that no one can do that work for you. Reading is thinking, and re-thinking, and coming to a conclusion which takes into account all the various parts of the reading. Practice and more practice is needed to master this difficult art.

And, so, my students' workload is heavy. But they bend to the task and their achievements are great. Like exercise, endurance of the initial pain over, they can preen before their intellectual mirrors and go on more confidently to further feats which require the exercise of their hard-won strengths.

Rationale for the Journal as Developmental Aid

The journal has become my chief tool for enabling students to handle the challenge of college-level reading. I have them write on everything they read. This forces them to practice. And, more importantly, it forces them to think.

Reading <u>is</u> work. And reading is thinking. The best teacher may employ the best teaching strategies; but teaching alone does not mean that learning has or will have occurred. Without our seeing student writing, we may never know that or whether learning has occurred -- or whether it has not. And without their having to do written assignments, students may not know -- immediately -- either.

Writing makes learning happen. Students rarely will write

"I don't know" as a journal entry, while they are only too willing to give this as response to a class question. The journal both forces and allows the student to come to grips with what s/he must learn -- and it allows him/her to do so in and on, for the most part, his/her own terms.

Reading Journal Assignments

I give two separate journal assignments to Reading Improvement classes. Both force form onto the journal concept to a lesser and to a greater degree. And I have found that the two assignments supplement each other in ways I had not foreseen.

The Free Journal

In the first I offer, in the purer sense of journal, freedom of at least choice to students in their writing subject: they can write on anything that they wish to read on their own, as outside reading. As to form, I tell them that they must give an insight into what the author of the article, story, or book of their choice has said and that they must give their response to what the author has said. Students are to write one such journal entry per week.

Student Response

Student responses to this assignment are positive. Students are forced to make their own assignments and find that they enjoy

having to do so. One student who claimed never to have read before said that she had begun to read the newspaper daily; and, by the semester's end, she was writing entries on novels that she was reading. Another student who did read coming into the class said, on leaving it, that she had never before been made to consider her own opinions on what she read; she was pleased at what she found out about both reading and herself in her having to do so.

Students enjoy the freedom that this assignment gives them and I enjoy watching the growth in sophistication in student insights and responses as the semester progresses. I attribute this growth in large part to the nature of my more rigid journal assignment.

The Reading Journal

I assign at least one -- and very often more than one -- reading selection per class session, in keeping with my idea that students must be confronted with the format of a regular college class in order to become accustomed to and capable of handling regular college classes. And the writing assignment that I give to go along with the reading is that they should state the author's purpose in writing whatever article, essay, poem, or story s/he has presented the readers with for their edification.

Most students, no matter how high their score on whatever reading test they have taken, do not, on entering the class, have any idea of how to properly question the material assigned them.

Having been given no strategies in reading, they find themselves, in facing each reading assignment, awash in a sea of meaningless information. Being asked to consider what the author is getting at in each reading is new, and even, at times, exciting, to students to whom reading has heretofore been a frustrating and therefore dull experience. Within the wide bounds which the question sets, every other reading strategy can be covered in class discussion. Their having to consider on their own and to write their considered opinion on their own makes this journal assignment meaningful and effective. And the continual exercise of the mental processes necessary for the consideration and the writing assignment gives the process the chance to become a meaningful and habitual part of the skill which it is meant to teach and which they are to take with them in their college and life reading.

Because students are new to the mental process, I give this assignment in two stages. And here, too, I adhere, to a lesser and greater degree, to the specifications of the journal.

Stage One

Students are, in stage one, to make a short tentative statement as to the author's purpose before the selection is discussed in class. They are to feel completely free to speculate on their own without the fear which the threat of a grade imposes. Their own thoughts in their own words -- however ungrammatically expressed -- are welcomed. They are graded here on their "simply" having read, thought about, and written about the material.

Class discussion after students have, no matter how tentatively, allowed something to happen between them and the author is very good. And students have begun to think on their own about their reading material.

Stage Two

Students, as stage two of this written assignment, are to select the two readings which they feel best able to discuss meaningfully at the end of each week, after their initial thoughts and the class' pooling of thoughts; and they are to turn their two tentative statements on these readings into formal thesis statements.

The statements are "formal" in thought only. In the manner of the journal, again, students are not made to feel that they must concern themselves with matters grammatical; they must, rather, concern themselves with the kind of thinking necessary to drawing valid conclusions of their reading. They are to show, then, their conclusion as to the author's purpose and to demonstrate the validity of their conclusion in each formal statement.

This is a rather sophisticated assignment for the average developmental student. But, considering that the nature of our assignment is to make our students sophisticated enough to do the work necessary to their earning college degrees, it is, I think, the assignment sufficient to the task. Students come to class having done their work and bearing proof of it. They are able to discuss each reading meaningfully. And they must then show their ability to state what they see as the author's point and to show

that it is, indeed, with reference to his/her material, the author's point.

Student Response

Student responses to this assignment are not, initially, as positive as those to the freer journal assignment. But the responses become unvaryingly positive as students see that they are learning to think meaningfully about their reading assignments -- that they are, in fact, reading as the authors would wish them to read. One student said that he had been reading as one blind and that he felt as though he were leaving the class with the gift of sight.

The Journal in the Paired Class

This second journal assignment may be used to advantage in Paired as well as in Reading courses. Students in a Sociology pair taught alongside an Introduction to Sociology class wrote thesis statements on each of the many individual reading assignments made by the Sociology Professor. Having had to think about each assignment in terms of the author's purpose gave them a new insight into Sociology and sociologists. Those who took the assignment most seriously did very well on both my (in the Paired class) and the Sociology Professor's examinations.

The Study Skills Journal

A General Study Skills class used the journal in yet another way. Here again application of skill was the issue and thinking, the focus. Students showed how they had applied each study skill learned to at least one course outside our own. The most creative students, in setting down their thoughts, came up with study methods which surpassed, in effectiveness and value, those set down in the study skills text. The freedom of expression which the journal allowed gave some students the opportunity to take the study methods as far as they could and to ask specific questions of me which I could then answer specifically in my responses. Grades rewarded the thought which the student expended and, again, not his/her grammatical skill in expressing the thought.

The Case Restated

Students, after having completed their journal assignments in the Reading, the Paired and the General Study Skills classes, knew that they had learned. And this resultant element of confidence is a most important factor for the student who has felt or been made to feel that s/he had neither the ability nor the skills with which to face the degree program without the help of the Reading/Study course. It would be difficult to say which factor, the skills or the confidence in themselves and their

skills, is more important for our students to carry with them as they go on, alone, to complete their college work. But certainly both are necessary to each student's success.

In teaching the Reading/Study Skills courses, we have in our hands the unique opportunity and the heavy responsibility for giving the majority of our students the tools for success which are offered them specifically in no other place.

Continual writing, because of the thinking it both promotes and ensures, is, I believe, the key to continual learning. With it, student and teacher see that learning is happening. Without it, neither teacher nor student knows whether learning is happening. With all that is expected of Reading and Study Skills classes, can we afford to pass up the opportunity for making at least some use of the assignment which ensures thinking through the active participation of each student who so desperately needs the discipline and the encouragement which completion of the assignment and our comments can offer?